



DOCUMENTATION

ONLINE DIALOGUE United in Diversity

How to make a participatory Conference on the Future of Europe happen and a success?

June 24, 2020

Bertelsmann Stiftung in cooperation with
King Baudouin Foundation and Open Society Foundations

Content

Plenary discussion	
Diverse and disunited? The member states and the Conference on the Future of Europe	3
Breakout sessions	
What needs to happen in order to make the Conference on the Future of Europe a success?	6
BREAKOUT SESSION 1	
What are the appropriate topics for the Conference on the Future of Europe in times of Corona?	6
BREAKOUT SESSION 2	
How can we make the Conference on the Future of Europe more digital and broaden participation?	7
BREAKOUT SESSION 3	
How do we involve civil society? Should civil society organisations be on an equal footing with the EU institutions? How can this be done?	8
BREAKOUT SESSION 4	
What will and what has to happen in the member states? How will different stakeholders in the Member States be involved?	9
Agenda	10
Imprint	10
List of participants	11

ONLINE DIALOGUE

On 24 June 2020, the Bertelsmann Stiftung, together with the King Baudouin Foundation and the Open Society Foundations, organised an online dialogue on the topic of ‘United in Diversity: How to make a participatory Conference on the Future of Europe happen and a success?’

The three foundations have been engaged in strengthening and expanding citizen participation for many years—a topic that is increasingly relevant for the European Union. By means of this online dialogue, fifty EU officials, think tankers, experts on democracy and European affairs, participation practitioners and journalists came together. Amélie de Montchalin¹, Minister of State in charge of European Affairs, France and Karoline Edtstadler Federal Minister for the EU and Constitution, Austria provided the dialogue with opening words. Discussions were held in the plenum, as well as in breakout sessions dealing with specific sub-topics.

The Chatham House Rule was applied at this event. Therefore, the documentation only provides an overview of discussion without referring to specific speakers.

¹ Since July 6, 2020 French Minister of Public Sector Transformation and the Civil Service in the government of Prime Minister Jean Castex.

Plenary discussion

Diverse and disunited? The member states and the Conference on the Future of Europe

The event started with some European music from Leslie&Kevin, two musicians based in Cologne. Dominik Hierlemann, Bertelsmann Stiftung, the moderator of the discussion, welcomed all participants. A short kick-off survey showed that a significant majority of the participants (59%) believed that the Corona crisis had made the topic of this afternoon's discussion—the Conference on the Future of Europe—'even more urgent than before', while another third of the participants (32%) thought that 'Corona showed the need for European cooperation, [and that] the Conference is part of this discussion'. Following this first temperature

check, Ms. Amélie de Montchalin and Ms. Karoline Edtstadler, the two guest speakers, took the online floor. As European Affairs ministers of France and Austria respectively, they both played an important and leading role in the difficult negotiations on the Conference on the Future of Europe within the Council of the European Union. After the introductory exchange with the two ministers, participants came in with questions and comments.

The conversation in the plenum covered a wide variety of topics related to the Conference on the Future of Europe. Some of the most important ones are highlighted below.

FIGURE 1 The Corona crisis has delayed the Conference on the Future of Future. But what about its importance?



Source: Own results

BertelsmannStiftung



The Conference as a means to enhance the EU's democratic legitimacy and capacity to act

After being asked about the relevance of the Conference, speakers and participants reflected on the internal and external challenges facing the European Union that make the Conference on the Future of Europe so relevant today. The Corona crisis was the last of these challenges happening against the backdrop of an increasingly volatile global geopolitical context. It was argued that the EU needs to affirm its own model in the world, and that the Corona crisis has shown that citizens expect more of the EU than it currently is able to deliver. If the EU fails to meet citizens' expectations, Eurosceptic forces are expected to gain more political ground, risking the very existence of the European Union and everything it stands for. Upon asking citizens what they want from Europe and following on from that, the Conference on the Future of Europe can enhance the EU's democratic legitimacy and its capacity to act, demonstrating the relevance of the EU in this day and age.

A Conference with an open outlook?!

While the Corona crisis demanded governments act quickly, it was recalled that this very crisis signaled the need for fundamental reflection and open dialogue on the future of our Union. This is the promise of the Conference on the Future of Europe. However, the difficult negotiations in the Council have shown that some governments are afraid of too much 'openness' in an initiative like this, which is in turn connected to their fear of opening the so-called Pandora's box of treaty change and the accompanying expectation of more European integration. It is for this reason that there is little appetite in the Council for developing the design and proposals of the Conference in a more open and collaborative fashion, in a spirit of co-creation with citizens and civil society. The less risk-averse governments in the Council have defended the need for an open attitude towards treaty change: on the one hand, treaty change should not be seen as an inevitable outcome of the Conference, on the other hand, it should not be excluded from the start either. Participants agreed that treaty change is only a means to an end, and hence should not be at the start of the conversation with citizens, while however being a possible outcome.

Citizen participation at the Conference: less is more, and follow-up is key

One of the lessons from the recently concluded French Convention *Citoyenne pour le Climat* was the need for citizens' assemblies to be clearly framed around concrete topics or questions. For the Conference on the Future of Europe, this means that decisions will need to be made: not all topics can be dealt with at the same time, and priorities need to be set. Participants did not only express a fear of the Conference dealing with 'everything and nothing', hesitation was also expressed related to the Conference having to deal with too many things from different origins, without a clear hierarchy of the input. Some argued for a single participatory and deliberative procedure for citizens to feed into the official Conference process and outcomes. European citizens' agoras composed by stratified random selection were proposed as the right procedure, ensuring a relatively simple and transnational approach. Lastly, it was emphasized repeatedly that the Conference can only be a success if citizens see their participation as making a concrete and visible impact on the EU itself. This is what has been missing in the EU's deliberative exercises so far—and most recently with the European Citizens' Consultations—and it risks increasing rather than decreasing popular disillusionment towards the EU. In order to prevent this, it was agreed that a concrete follow-up procedure should be specified even before the Conference kicks off.

A Conference with shared ownership

There seems to be a new generation of EU politicians that recognizes the need to actively involve citizens in EU decision-making. In the absence of citizens' active support, the EU simply cannot deliver on key political priorities, like the Green Deal. However, speakers and participants did not only stress the need for the Conference to have shared ownership among EU politicians and citizens, they also warned against the Conference becoming a Brussels-only exercise. Only if the member states—initially national governments and parliaments—share the ownership of the Conference can the Conference make a significant political difference. In the absence of the necessary national co-ownership, follow-up on the outcomes of the Conference will be amiss.

After the breakout sessions, participants returned to the plenum to report on their group discussions, and there was other news as well: the Council had agreed on its position on the Conference at the level of member state ambassadors, clearing the way for the interinstitutional negotiations with the European Parliament and the Commission to begin. A joint agreement among the three key EU institutions would allow the Conference to make its long-awaited start. If anything, the online dialogue showed the progress that had been made in the EU when it comes to sensitizing EU politicians towards new forms of citizen engagement, but similarly the long road that still lies ahead for this new awareness to translate into an EU that is more democratic, resilient and effective in its confrontation with the manifold challenges of our time.



Breakout sessions

What needs to happen in order to make the Conference on the Future of Europe a success?

BREAKOUT SESSION 1

What are the appropriate topics for the Conference on the Future of Europe in times of Corona?

The participants stressed that the question must be unpacked as it entails many assumptions: Who should decide on the issues to be debated? Who should choose them? And on what basis? What criteria should be used to select the topics?

Deciding on topics

Who will choose the topics and what criteria will define what topics are chosen in order to clearly define the process? When it comes to who should decide, some participants said that citizens should decide (bottom up), whereas others preferred a top-down approach (politicians set the topics). A compromise could be a joint agenda setting: political leaders pre-select topics, citizens score them and the politicians take the highest scoring topics into serious consideration.

Less is more

No matter whether a compromise is top down or bottom up, the common opinion among participants was that topics should be carefully selected, be transnationally relevant, and possibly readdress past blocked topics. Careful selection can also be understood as choosing less topics for more quality.

Institutional versus policy topics

Besides the how and the what, participants also raised the question of institutional versus policy topics. The participants stressed that institutional issues such as treaty change, Spitzenkandidaten or unanimity in the Council are never an end in itself. Institutional topics could be covered, but the Conference on the Future of Europe still requires some tweaks.

BREAKOUT SESSION 2

How can we make the Conference on the Future of Europe more digital and broaden participation?

The participants shared experiences from their own organizations and institutions: from kitchen table discussions to online platforms set up by different EU institutions.

The hybrid model

The first mentioned idea combines a virtual with a real life consultation by inviting people to host small rounds of discussions around a kitchen table, providing these hosts with an indicative agenda, background information and possible discussion questions. The hosts in return feed-back on the outcomes of the discussion virtually to the main organizer. Whilst this model is scalable to an unlimited number, a challenge that was outlined is the recruitment of (volunteer) hosts. Furthermore, the concept truly creates added value when tightly defined questions are provided; it does not seem suitable for larger, pan-European questions but a hybrid model could, however, complement bigger European questions.

Institutional platform

A series of institutional platforms that were introduced recently as part of the Citizens Dialogue as well as upcoming ones were presented. The platforms are hosted in all the EU languages, making it accessible to all citizens. It was underlined that a future online platform for the Conference should be a one-stop resource granting transparency and access to all instruments, information, activities, outcomes and follow up decisions. The online platform should have a clear structure and provide sound overviews and summaries. It should not be passive but promote interaction with and between citizens, possibly similar to an experiment initiated by quality newspapers that matched users with different opinions to discuss specific issues. Time is of essence here: should the Conference start in the second half of the year, the platform needs to be developed quickly whilst maintaining a high level of quality. Furthermore, the digital aspect might also spill over to the concept of face-to-face meetings that were originally planned within the framework of the Conference. Nonetheless, there must be a connection between offline and online consultations to cater to offline citizens allowing their voices to also be heard.

The unknown

Countries that are not familiar with the citizens dialogue format must also be considered. For these countries, it is not only understanding the approach but also making it a safe way to communicate online.

BREAKOUT SESSION 3

How do we involve civil society? Should civil society organisations be on an equal footing with the EU institutions? How can this be done?

The participants raised the questions of how and which civil society organisations should be involved and emphasized the importance to have commitment from the politicians.

Diversity across the board

The participants stressed that a clear diversity of types and formats of participation to allow for a rich participation from Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) and citizens are needed. This immediately also implies complete transparency in the process and a consideration of how to manage who sits at the table. Participation processes should also be linked, such as connecting the deliberative citizen part with the input from civil society.

Outside of the box

Groups that are undecided or even sceptical of the EU project should not be excluded to avoid the impression that only organizations that are positive towards the EU project were at the table. The setting can and should involve conflicting opinions and allow for ways to resolve them. Thought should also be given to how we can get CSOs to think out of their thematic bubbles and also engage in a broader European discussion.

A bottom-up, broad and long-term approach

For this reason, a top-down approach should be avoided, so that CSOs feel they have ownership of the process. To allow broad participation, it is important to reach out locally so there is no threshold of distance to participate. The geography of the debates is as such less important than the fact that they are European debates. Thought should be given to the way citizens can also intervene in other ways and during other stages of the process, such as proposing topics for the debates through an online platform or crowdsourcing of ideas. The process should not be regarded as a one-off event, but rather as a stage for continuous exercise. A follow-up could, for example, be a European Convention where citizens and CSOs once again adopt an important role.

Commitment

Finally, all of this should matter and so those governing should also be asked to give a clear engagement of what this will lead to so it cannot just be ignored.

BREAKOUT SESSION 4

What will and what has to happen in the member states? How will different stakeholders in the Member States be involved?

The participants underlined the complexity and demanding nature of the Conference on the Future of Europe and focused on two elements that are necessary to ensure the quality of the outcomes: interconnectedness and the setting of standards.

A complex and demanding exercise

The Conference on the Future of Europe is a complex exercise, involving different actors at different levels. By citizens, we also mean that civil society should be involved in the Conference on the Future of Europe process. Given this complexity, time is very short between autumn 2020 and spring 2022. A lot has to be done and organizers should not underestimate the effort required if they want to get it right.

The success of the Conference on the Future of Europe does not only mean that European leaders will know better what citizens are thinking about and what they want from Europe, but also that there is a proper follow up to the process.

Policy first, institutional second

The Conference on the Future of Europe should first debate policy issues and take care of the substance, and only later turn to institutional matters.

Interconnectedness

Thinking has to go into how the outcome of discussions at the national level should be taken to the EU level. One way would be through the collection of citizens' opinions in clusters corresponding to the policy areas topics that get the attention of the Conference. Another way would be the transnationalisation of debates to help raise awareness and foster better understanding among European citizens across borders.

Standardization

In order to arrive at common conclusions—in terms of the collection of citizen input and an EU-wide comparison—it is important to set standards for the format of national events and the reporting at the end of the process. Standardization is very important (see lessons from European Citizens' Consultations).

It is critical to ask ourselves the question of how we systematically, and on a more permanent basis, shift our way of doing politics to build trust among the different governmental levels with the inclusive approach that the Conference seeks to adopt.

Agenda

16:15 **Informal get together with music**

16:30 **Diverse and disunited?**
The member states and the Conference on the Future of Europe

A conversation with:

Amélie de Montchalin,
Minister of State in charge for European Affairs, France

Karoline Edtstadler,
Federal Minister for the EU and Constitution, Austria

moderated by

Dominik Hierlemann, Bertelsmann Stiftung

Followed by Q&A and plenary discussion

17:15 **Breakout Sessions:**
What needs to happen in order to make the Conference a success?

- Which topics for the Conference in times of Corona?
- How can we make the Conference more digital and how to broaden participation?
- How can we involve civil society?
- What will and what has to happen in the member states?

18:00 **Followed by presentation of session results and discussion**

End of Online Dialogue

Music and informal conversation

Publication details

© Bertelsmann Stiftung, Gütersloh
September 2020

Responsible for content:
Dominik Hierlemann
Anna Renkamp

Co-author:

Maarten de Groot
Céline Diebold

Thank you to the rapporteurs for taking notes
and providing them after the event in order
to help summarize the breakout sessions.

Cover photo:

© Mykola Kuklyshyn/stock.adobe.com

Graphic design:

Markus Diekmann, Bielefeld

List of participants

Prof. Alberto Alemanno	Jean Monnet Professor of EU Law & Policy, HEC Paris, France
Mina Andreeva	Deputy Head of Unit – European Commission SG.A5 Strategic Communication and Foresight, Belgium
Bjørn Bedsted	Deputy Director and Head of DBT International, The Danish Board of Technology Foundation, Denmark
Carsten Berg	Director, Association for the European Citizens' Initiative e.V., Germany
Dalila Bernard	Administrator, European Economic and Social Committee, Belgium
Gabriele Bischoff	Member of the European Parliament
Sixtine Bouygues	Deputy Director-General, DG Communication, European Commission, Belgium
Kinga Brudzińska	Head of Programme Future of Europe, Globsec Policy Institute, Slovakia
Obhi Chatterjee	Head of Sector, Learning Technologies, Directorate-General for Human Resources and Security, European Commission, Belgium
Jan Chudoba	Policy Officer, EU Policies Department, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Czech Republic
Claudia Chwalisz	Policy Analyst, Open Government, OECD, France
Mattia de' Grassi	Member of Cabinet of Vice-President Dubravka Šuica, European Commission, Belgium
Maarten de Groot	Project Manager, Program Future of Democracy, Bertelsmann Stiftung, Germany
Yves Dejaeghere	Coordinator G1000, Belgium
Amélie de Montchalin	Minister of State in charge for European Affairs, France
Astrid Dentler	Member of Cabinet of Vice-President, Dubravka Šuica, European Commission, Belgium
Karoline Edtstadler	Federal Minister for the EU and Constitution, Austria
Janis A. Emmanouilidis	Director of Studies, European Policy Centre, Belgium
Gisela Erler	State councillor for Civil Society and Civic Participation, Staatsministerium Baden-Württemberg, Germany
David Farrell	Head of School, School of Politics and International Relations, University College Dublin, Ireland
Petros Fassoulas	Secretary General, European Movement International, Belgium
Carina Ferreira	Secretary of Embassy, Institutional Affairs Department, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Portugal, Portugal
Daniel Freund	Member of the European Parliament
Sebastian Gerhardt	Head, EP-Team, Permanent Representation of Germany to the EU, Belgium
Agata Gostyńska-Jakubowska	Senior Research Fellow, Centre for European Reform, United Kingdom
Heather Grabbe	Director, Open Society Initiative for Europe, Open Society Foundations, Germany
Doreen Grove	Head of Open Government, Scottish Government
Ángela Guimarães Pereira	Team Leader, Joint Research Centre, European Commission Joint Research Centre, Italy
Dominik Hierlemann	Senior Expert, Program Future of Democracy, Bertelsmann Stiftung, Germany
Christian Huesmann	Project Manager, Program Future of Democracy, Bertelsmann Stiftung, Germany
Assya Kavrakova	Executive Director, European Citizen Action Service, Belgium
Richard Nikolaus Kühnel	Director, DG Communication, European Commission, Belgium
Rose Longhurst	Programme Officer, Open Society Initiative for Europe, Open Society Foundations, Germany
Igor Mally	Directorate for EU Affairs, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Slovenia
Leonie Martin	President, JEF Young European Federalists, Belgium
Raphaël Métails	EU Representative, Political Department, French Embassy, Germany
Marilyn Neven	Programme Manager, IDEA, Belgium
Joachim Ott	Head of Unit, European Commission DG Communication, Belgium
Wolfgang Petzold	Deputy Director, Communication, Committee of the Regions, Belgium
Rosa Podgorny	Head of Division, Institutional Affairs Department, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Portugal, Portugal
Wojciech Przybylski	Editor-in-chief, Visegrad/Insight - Res Publica Foundation, Poland
Anna Renkamp	Senior Project Manager, Program Future of Democracy, Bertelsmann Stiftung, Germany
Gaëtane Ricard-Nihoul	Deputy Head of Unit, DG Communication, European Commission, Belgium
Stefan Roch	Project Manager, Program Future of Democracy, Bertelsmann Stiftung, Germany
Inga Rosińska	Director for Information and Outreach, Communication and Information, General-Secretariat, Council of the European Union, Belgium
Stefan Schäfers	Director, Head of European Affairs, King Baudouin Foundation, Belgium
Helmut Scholz	Member of the European Parliament
Corina Stratulat	Senior Policy Analyst, Head of the European Politics and Institutions Programme, European Policy Centre, Belgium
Laura Sullivan	Executive Director, WeMove Europe, Belgium
Markus Teglas	Head of Office of Minister of State Michael Roth, Federal Foreign Office, Germany
Christina Tillmann	Director, Program Future of Democracy, Bertelsmann Stiftung, Germany
Richard Youngs	Senior Fellow, Carnegie Europe, Belgium

Address | Contact

Bertelsmann Stiftung

Carl-Bertelsmann-Straße 256
33311 Gütersloh
Germany
Phone +49 5241 81-0

Dr. Dominik Hierlemann
Program Future of Democracy
Phone +49 5241 81-81537
dominik.hierlemann@bertelsmann-stiftung.de

Anna Renkamp
Program Future of Democracy
Phone +49 5241 81-81145
anna.renkamp@bertelsmann-stiftung.de

King Boudain Foundation

Dr. Stefan Schäfers
European Affairs
Phone +32 2 549 0239
schaefers.s@kbs-frb.be

Open Society Foundations

Rose Longhurst
Open Society Initiative For Europe
Phone +49 30 300139630
rose.longhurst@opensocietyfoundations.org

Supported (in part) by a grant from the Foundation Open Society Institute in cooperation with the OSIFE of the Open Society Foundations. Supported (in part) by a grant from King Baudouin Foundation.

Further information can be found on

www.bertelsmann-stiftung.de/en/our-projects/democracy-and-participation-in-europe/

www.bertelsmann-stiftung.de/en